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Thomas C. Richardson

John Lockhart's Burns:
Stirring "National Enthusiasm"

John Lockhart's *Life of Robert Burns* was first published in 1828 as a volume in Constable's *Miscellany*, a series of literary and scientific works cheaply published (in duodecimo) and widely available to "readers of every class." The biography has enjoyed remarkable publication success, reprinted frequently throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. An octavo edition was also published by Constable in 1828; the third, "corrected," edition was published in 1830 by Constable in the *Miscellany* format. Murray, Tegg, Bell, and Ward-Lock also published editions in the nineteenth century; twentieth-century publications include Hutchinson's Library of Standard Biographies; a limited edition (520 copies) by Henry Young, edited by William Scott Douglas; and a Dent Everyman edition, published first in 1907, reissued as late as 1976, and currently available in an AMS reprint.

As the printing history might suggest, the critical response to Lockhart's biography has been largely positive, although nearly always qualified; critics have always acknowledged flaws, but the overall quality of the work and the popularity of the subject have largely overshadowed the weaknesses and inaccuracies. The extreme critical positions are represented by Andrew Lang and Franklyn Bliss Snyder. Lang in his 1897 *Life and Letters of Lockhart* wrote: "New Lives of Burns follow fast on each other, but Lockhart's is never likely to be superseded."¹ Snyder, in 1932, had a different opinion: "The best that

¹Andrew Lang, *The Life and Letters of John Gibson Lockhart*. 2 vols. (London, 1897), II, 28.

one can say of it today, however, is that it occasioned Carlyle's review. It is inexcusably inaccurate from beginning to end, at times demonstrably mendacious, and should never be trusted in any respect or detail."²

For the most part, however, critical opinion places the work somewhere between Lang and Snyder, closer to the assessments offered by Sir Walter Scott and Thomas Carlyle. Scott wrote to Lockhart in June 1828 that the biography had done Lockhart "infinite credit"; although Scott could provide evidence to support his differing perspectives, he concedes that Lockhart chose "the wiser and better view."³ On 29 May 1828 Scott had already recorded his opinion of the work in his journal:

I have amused myself to-day with reading Lockhart's *Life of Burns*, which is very well written—in fact, an admirable thing. He has judiciously slurred over his vices and follies; for although Currie, I myself, and others, have not said a word more on that subject than is true, yet as the dead corpse is straightened, swathed, and made decent, so ought the character of such an inimitable genius as Burns to be tenderly handled after death. The knowledge of his vicious weaknesses or vices is only a subject of sorrow to the well-disposed, and of triumph to the profligate.⁴

Thomas Carlyle, in his review of the biography for the *Edinburgh Review*, saw Lockhart's as the best to date (1828) of the biographies of Burns, citing Lockhart's achievement in portraying Burns as "the high and remarkable man the public has pronounced him to be" and "delineating him" as a "whole man, as he looked and lived among his fellows"; Lockhart, according to Carlyle, presented the "true character of Burns."⁵ Yet, Carlyle was critical of Lockhart for not writing enough, either in terms of the depth of treatment or, especially, in Lockhart's own voice—which led Carlyle to pronounce that "we are far from thinking that the problem of Burns's Biography has yet been adequately solved" (Carlyle, p. 3).

Lockhart clearly recognized that there was not universal agreement regarding Burns, that not everyone was so generous in his assessment of Burns's poetry or so tolerant of his social behavior or political leanings. Regardless of the varied opinions either about Burns himself, as a person and a poet, or the accomplishments of Lockhart's writing about Burns, Lockhart in his *Life of*

²Franklyn Bliss Snyder, *The Life of Robert Burns* (New York, 1932), pp. 488-9.

³*The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. H. J. C. Grierson. 12 vols. (London, 1932-7), X, 427.

⁴*The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*. 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1890), II, 195.

⁵Thomas Carlyle, *Essays Scottish and Other Miscellanies*, Introd. James Russell Lowell (London, 1967), p. 3. Henceforth Carlyle.

Burns offers a point over which, he claims, "there can be no controversy; the poetry of Burns has had most powerful influence in reviving and strengthening the national feelings of his countrymen."⁶ It is Burns as a stimulus to "national enthusiasm" that is central to Lockhart's writing about Burns, and it is this focus that I will explore in this paper. I wish to look at Lockhart's *Life of Burns* in the context of nearly two decades of Lockhart's writing and thinking about Burns and Scottish nationalism, examining the circumstances in which the biography was written and setting the work in the context of Lockhart's ideas about biography as a genre.

Lockhart had written a great deal about Burns long before he contracted to do the biography for Constable. In an article on Thomas Moore in *Blackwood's Magazine*, October 1818, Lockhart had developed in miniature the spirit of the Burns biography:

There are few things more worthy of being studied, either in their character or in their effects, than the poems of Robert Burns. This man, born and bred a peasant, was taught, like all other Scotsmen, to read his Bible, and learned by heart, in his infancy, the heroic ballads of his nation. Amidst the solitary occupations of his rural labours, the soul of the ploughman fed itself with high thoughts of patriotism and religion, and with that happy instinct which is the best prerogative of genius, he divined everything that was necessary for being the poet of his country. The men of his nation, high and low, are educated men; meditative in their spirit, proud in their recollections, steady in their patriotism, and devout in their faith. At the time, however, when he appeared, the completion of their political union with a greater and wealthier kingdom, and the splendid success which had crowned their efforts in adding to the general literature of Britain—but above all, the chilling nature of the merely speculative philosophy, which they had begun to cultivate, seemed to threaten a speedy diminution of their fervent attachment to that which was peculiarly their own. This mischievous tendency was stopped by a peasant, and the noblest of his land are the debtors of his genius. He revived the spark that was about to be extinguished—and taught men to reverence with increasing homage, that enthusiasm of which they were beginning to be ashamed. The beauty of many of his descriptions, the coarseness of many of his images, cannot conceal from our eyes the sincerity with which, at the bottom of his heart, this man was the worshipper of the pure genius of his country. The improprieties are superficial, the excellence is ever deep—The man might be guilty in his own person of pernicious trespasses, but his soul came back, like a dove, to repose amidst images of purity.—He is at present, the favourite poet of a virtuous, a pious, a patriotic people; and the first symptom of their decay in virtue, piety, and patriotism, will be seen on the instant when Scots-

⁶John Gibson Lockhart, *Life of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1828), p. 428. Henceforth *Life*.

men shall cease to treasure in their hearts the "Highland Mary," the "Cottar's Saturday Night," and the "Song of Bannockburn."⁷

In *Peter's Letters to His Kinsfolk* (1819), Lockhart provides extended discussions of Burns and Scottish nationalism. In reading *Peter's Letters*, one cannot altogether lose sight of the method Lockhart uses, writing in what can reasonably be called the "literature-as-hoax school" of the early days of *Blackwood's Magazine*; Lockhart's voice is the fictional persona of Dr. Peter Morris, a Welshman, who travels in Scotland and connects with the important literary, social, and political figures of the time, and then writes his observations in letters back to his relatives and friends in Wales. Yet, the fictional veil is very thin. In the penetrating character sketches, the biases towards Tory politics and against the *Edinburgh Review*, and the incisive critical commentary, the text will not let us suspend our disbelief in the voice of the *Blackwood's* Lockhart for very long. When we read, then, of the Burns supper and literary nationalism, one hears Lockhart, especially as that voice is clearly corroborated in the biography itself.

Lockhart through Morris defines literary nationalism in terms of associations—language, religion, historical circumstances, "fine poetical situations"⁸—that transcend political boundaries. Morris advises that while Scotland "looks back upon the history of England, as upon that of the country to which she has suspended and rendered subordinate her fortunes, yet she should by no means regard English *literature*, as an expression of her mind" (*Peter's Letters*, II, 360-61). Thus, it is in portraying the "national modes of feeling" that such writers as Burns and Scott have secured and maintained a national identity for Scotland that is both a-geographic and portable because it is internal.

Dr. Morris attends his first "Burns Dinner" in February 1819, having procured a ticket to this sold-out event from Henry Mackenzie; the dinner had to be held in the Assembly-Rooms in George Street in order to accommodate the crowds. Morris exclaimed that he had

never witnessed a more triumphant display of national enthusiasm, and had never expected to witness any display within many thousand degrees of it, under any thing less than the instantaneous impulse of some glorious victory....—the highest, and the wisest, and the best of a nation assembled together—and all for what?—to do honour to the memory of one low-born peasant. What a lofty tribute to the true no-

⁷ John Gibson Lockhart, "Remarks on the Poetry of Thomas Moore," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 4 (Oct. 1818), 1.

⁸ John Gibson Lockhart, *Peter's Letters to his Kinsfolk*. 2nd edn. 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1819), II, 358. Henceforth *Peter's Letters*.

bility of Nature!—What a glorious vindication of the born majesty of Genius! (*Peter's Letters*, I, 111-12).

Morris was not long in his euphoric exclamations, however, before he turned his attentions to Francis Jeffrey and Jeffrey's disparagement of Burns in the *Edinburgh Review*—and his comments turned caustic. Morris does not understand how a man of such high principles as Jeffrey could possibly justify "concentrating the whole pitiless vigour of his satire" on Burns who, regardless of his faults, was entitled to compassion; or how Jeffrey could exhaust "his quiver of poisoned shafts in piercing and lacerating the resting-place of one, whose living name must always be among the dearest and most sacred possessions of his countrymen." He continues to argue that Jeffrey "displayed in that attack a very lamentable defect, not merely of nationality of feeling, but of humanity of feeling" (*Peter's Letters*, II, 117-18). Although Morris acknowledges that Jeffrey had to some degree a change of heart about Burns, for Morris (and for Lockhart as well) the point still must be made unequivocally that there is no place for politics (or "Whig-bigotry" as Morris calls it), social haughtiness, or moral self-righteousness in the assessment of Burns's value to Scottish literature and, thus, to the Scottish nation. The image of Burns is central to Scottish identity, as Lockhart writes in the biography:

Amidst penury and labour, his youth fed on the old minstrelsy and traditional glories of his nation, and his genius divined, that what he felt so deeply must belong to a spirit that might lie smothered around him, but could not be extinguished. The political circumstances of Scotland were, and had been, such to starve the flame of patriotism; the popular literature had striven, and not in vain, to make itself English; and, above all, a new and cold system of speculative philosophy had begun to spread widely among us. A peasant appeared, and set himself to check the creeping pestilence of this indifference. Whatever genius has since then been devoted to the illustration of the national manners, and sustaining thereby the national feelings of the people, there can be no doubt that Burns will ever be remembered as the founder, and, alas! in his own person as the martyr, of this reformation (*Life*, pp. 428-9).

The character of Lockhart's Burns was well defined, then, when Lockhart was given the opportunity to do a *Life* for *Constable's Miscellany*. Lockhart was closely involved with the development of the *Miscellany* from its inception in 1825, and the Burns biography was among the early projects in the plan. In May 1825 Lockhart writes to Constable with suggestions for works to be included in the project and even a suggestion for the name of the project. It is early September, however, before Constable writes to Lockhart, saying that he will soon send a prospectus, after having developed "twenty editions." On 20 September 1825 Constable writes to Lockhart that he has sent Lockhart copies of various editions of Burns and related works, adding that he had "upwards of a hundred originals of letters, and Poems, which are at present in the hands of a Book binder," although much of that material had been "seen and used by

Cromek.”⁹ Lockhart writes to Blackwood several days later that he has “much to say when we meet—something very seriously on the subject of Constable’s *Miscellany* which (the programme having come to me by post) is I suppose no longer a secret. You will perceive that I have undertaken to write for it a little volume about Burns for which he, Sir W[alter] Scott, & Sir A[lexander] Don have put some strange materials into my hands.”¹⁰

Lockhart begins collecting material and writing the biography in the fall of 1825, but the entire *Miscellany* project was temporarily shelved due to what Lockhart called “the derangement in Constable’s affairs”;¹¹ Lockhart himself left Edinburgh in December 1825 to become editor of the *Quarterly Review* in London. It is late January 1827 before the correspondence resumes between Lockhart and Constable regarding the Burns biography. Constable writes that he would “feel much mortification were you not to give me the life of Burns,” adding that it “would do a vast thing for me, and gratify the literary world” if Lockhart were to write two volumes rather than one.¹² Lockhart writes to Constable that he is happy to hear that the *Miscellany* had started successfully:

Since you think that my Life of Robert Burns is worth the asking for *now*, I am sure I shall have much pleasure in writing it: but unfortunately, considering the matter was at an end, I had some time ago boxed up all the materials I had collected in London & that in such a way that I fear I cannot without great difficulty get at them for some time. I trust nothing is to prevent my spending the chief part of next summer in Scotland & shall look forward to *Burns* as my work during that time.

As to *two* volumes—I doubt whether that would not be too much for a *Life* of Burns: if a selection from his poetry is to be included, the case is altered & indeed I think it would be doing a service to his fame to place before the public those pieces by which alone he merits his place, apart altogether from his mawkish attempts in the English dialect, & also those Scottish performances the coarseness of which much overbalances their wit & which at any rate sh[oul]d never be included in such a work as your *Miscellany*. I shall be happy to hear what you have to say to these suggestions & of course to see the original pieces of Burns in your possession. I have myself obtained several trifles of his in MS from various quarters: & curious enough *memoranda* from 2 or 3 friends who recollect the Poet in the flesh.¹³

⁹National Library of Scotland, MS 331 ff. 255-6. Henceforth NLS.

¹⁰NLS, MS 4015 f. 14.

¹¹NLS, MS 1553 ff. 1-2.

¹²NLS, MS 331 f. 271.

¹³NLS, MS 331 ff. 269-70.

In November Lockhart writes to Scott for "personal recollections of Robert Burns" and as soon as possible "for I am far advanced with my little book about him,"¹⁴ although in June 1828 he is still asking Scott for "memoranda" as the book is to be "reprinted forthwith."¹⁵ Allan Cunningham had also provided anecdotes for Lockhart when he first began writing, but two years later when he gets back to the project he cannot find the Cunningham material; in January 1828 Lockhart writes to Cunningham again, confessing that his "most valuable & delightful letter about *Burns*...was *too* carefully put by.... May I beg the very unheard of favour that you w[oul]d write me another letter embracing the most material matters."¹⁶

Although the *Life of Burns* was largely written in the late 1827 and early 1828, it is significant nonetheless that Lockhart had begun his *Burns* in 1825. From 1821 to 1824 Lockhart wrote and published four novels and completed a major revision of one of the novels for a second edition: *Valerius; A Roman Story* (1821); *Some Passages in the Life of Mr. Adam Blair, Minister of the Gospel at Cross-Meikle* (1822; 2nd edn., 1824); *Reginald Dalton* (1823); and *The History of Matthew Wald* (1824). His novel titles could be mistaken for biographies; in fact, one might be tempted to argue that Lockhart's training as a biographer came as a fiction writer, that for Lockhart there is little distinction between the purpose of the biographer and the purpose of the novelist. In 1826 Lockhart published a review of Scott's *Lives of the Novelists* in which he argued that the task of the novelist above all is to excel in the "conception and delineation of *character*.... We read no fiction twice," Lockhart continues, "that merely heaps description upon description, and weaves incident with incident, however cleverly. The imitating romancer shrinks at once into his proper dimensions when we ask—what new character has he given us?"¹⁷

Lockhart's practice as a biographer was to present character; presenting the image was more important than strict accuracy in recollecting events or presenting "facts"—which explains why Lockhart relied so heavily on personal recollections and anecdotes. Writing to John Murray in 1846, Lockhart suggests that Christopher Wordsworth might "take in hand Carlyle's *Cromwell*" to review for the *Quarterly Review*. Lockhart comments on Carlyle's method of biography in terms that could well apply to his own; Lockhart writes: I

¹⁴NLS, MS 3905 f. 161.

¹⁵NLS, MS 3906 f. 291.

¹⁶NLS, MS 1553 ff. 1-2.

¹⁷John Gibson Lockhart, "Lives of the Novelists," *Quarterly Review*, 34 (Sept. 1826), 378.

“suspect [Carlyle] makes fact bend to image rather than otherwise.”¹⁸ William Menzies also makes this point well in a letter to Lockhart after the publication of Lockhart’s *Life of Scott*:

I perfectly well recollect the incident of the “hand” tho’ I am afraid you have embellished it a little. Some literary Grub, criticizing the works of Lockhart some 50 years hence, may accuse him of inaccuracy, & and in support of his charge, prove that in 1812 W. M.’s only Uncle was in India, & that the said W. M. did not reside in George Street before Whitsunday 1818. In the summer of which year I imagine the “Hand” alluded to took place. The anecdote however is so well introduced where it stands, as to make the anachronism of no consequence.¹⁹

Another characteristic of Lockhart’s image-making biography is that he does not write all he knows about his subject’s character. Lockhart’s method of character portrayal in biography also insisted upon discretion in presentation of delicate personal matters, especially if there were living relatives who might be hurt by public disclosures of family secrets, and especially if those living relatives were women. When James Hogg, for example, published his *Anecdotes of Scott*, Lockhart was outraged at Hogg’s insensitivity in publishing embarrassing comments about the Scotts; as Lockhart wrote to Blackwood, Hogg had included in his memoir of Scott two objectionable passages, “one of them being a most flagrant assault on Scott’s *veracity* & the other a statement about poor Lady Scott such as must have afflicted for ever her children & especially her surviving daughters.”²⁰ As another example, in 1839 Thomas De Quincey had published a series of articles in *Tait’s Magazine* on Wordsworth and the Lake Poets, including unflattering sketches of Dorothy and Mary Wordsworth. Lockhart was incensed by the improprieties in De Quincey’s publications and writes to Whitwell Elwin: “How he sh[oul]d have dared to print such papers in 1839 is inconceivable on any other theory than that of insanity or intoxication but no doubt the malice had long been deliberately fixed.” Lockhart continues: “De Quincey must be punished by neglect. His publishing such papers about W[illiam] W[ordsworth] in his lifetime was monstrous—but the drawing detailed portraits of the wife & sister, both then & still alive, seems to me to match the old Lowther tyrant’s audacity of wickedness.”²¹ Lockhart’s sense of propriety undoubtedly affected his approach to the life of Burns.

¹⁸John Murray Archives.

¹⁹NLS, MS 935 f. 12.

²⁰NLS, MS 4039 ff. 83-4.

²¹NLS, MS 2262 ff. 22-4.

If it is significant that Lockhart began his biography of Burns in Edinburgh in 1825, it is just as significant that he finished the work in London in 1828. Lockhart's strong nationalistic themes that run throughout his early criticism and fiction are only intensified by his move to London in a political atmosphere less than favorable to Scottish interests; indeed, Lockhart seemed to regard himself as something of an exile, an attitude that is manifest in the correspondence with Scott and others in Scotland, his own brief political ambitions, and particularly in the quiet but regular contributions to *Blackwood's Magazine*, even while he was editor of the *Quarterly Review*. Lockhart's "Noctes Ambrosianae" in the September 1829 issue of *Blackwood's* is exemplary. Although Lockhart writes to Blackwood that since these are "ticklish times for politics"²² he is sending something different, in fact this "Noctes" is a highly-charged political discussion of the effects of the Union and its aftermath on the Scottish people, Scottish trade, even Scottish religion, and the Union's stimulus to emigration. This "Noctes" includes the well-known "Canadian Boat-Song," a poem by Lockhart that purports to be a translation from the Gaelic of a Highland oar-song sent to Christopher North by a friend "now in Upper Canada." One verse will illustrate the tone of the poem:

From the lone shieling of the misty island
Mountains divide us, and the waste of seas—
Yet still the blood is strong, the heart is Highland,
And we in dreams behold the Hebrides:
Chorus *Fair these broad meads—these hoary woods are grand;
But we are exiles from our fathers' land.*

And in the poem written in September 1831 on the occasion of Scott's departure from Abbotsford for Malta, Lockhart echoes the exilic terms of the "Boat-Song." Lockhart published his "Lines Written on Tweedside *September 18th, 1831,*" in his *Memoirs* of Scott. The immediate inspiration for the poem was a farewell dinner hosted by Scott; dinner guests included Captain James Burns, son of the poet, as well as Lockhart and others. Although the poem is perhaps overly dramatic in its national spirit, Lockhart suggests the poem expressed "the sincere feelings with which every guest witnessed this his parting feast."²³ Three of the twelve verses capture the spirit of the poem:

What princely stranger comes?—what exiled Lord
From the far East to Scotia's strand returns—

²²NLS, MS 4025 ff. 72-3.

²³John Gibson Lockhart, *Memoirs of Sir Walter Scott*. 5 vols. (London, 1900), V, 352. Henceforth *Memoirs*.

To stir with joy the towers of Abbotsford
And "wake the Minstrel's soul"?—The boy of Burns.

O, Sacred Genius! blessing on the chains,
Wherein thy sympathy can minds entwine!
Beyond the conscious glow of kindred veins,
A power, a spirit, and a charm are thine....

The children sang the ballads of their sires:—
Serene among them sat the hoary Knight;
And, if dead Bards have ears for earthly lyres,
The Peasant's shade was near, and drank delight (*Memoirs*, V, p. 353).

For the Scottish people, who were exiled from their native land, either having literally left their country, or perhaps as important, who felt in their political circumstances at home that their country had left them, the "Peasant's shade" is always near. It is in this spirit that Lockhart concludes the *Life of Burns*: "Burns, short and painful as were his years, has left behind him a volume in which there is inspiration for every fancy, and music for every mood; which lives, and will live in strength and vigour—... a volume, in which centuries hence, as now, wherever a Scotsman may wander, he will find the dearest consolation of his exile." (*Life*, pp. 445-6).

When Lockhart put his hand to the writing of biography, he had at his service the skills of the novelist in character development as well as a deep commitment to the cause of Scottish nationalism as a personal perspective if not a political reality; Burns is the ideal subject for his first biography. Lockhart's *Life of Robert Burns* is not a work of fiction, but like fiction the work excels in the "conception and delineation of character." And the central character of this prose is clearly conceived in such a way as to stimulate national enthusiasm. Thus, it is perhaps as appropriate to regard the words *Robert Burns* as a trope as much as a name in Lockhart's writing, for Lockhart expected the words to create an image that transcends the physical or literary life of the person.

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